

VOLUNTEERING IN MCLEOD GANJ

WHERE IS MCLEOD GANJ?

“McLeod Ganj” is your final destination; it is in the state of Himachal Pradesh, in the district of Kangra. It is sometimes called “Upper Dharamsala”.

McLeod Ganj is uphill from Dharamsala.



GETTING TO MCLEOD GANJ

ARRIVAL IN INDIA

Most people coming to McLeod Ganj fly into New Delhi airport. You can make your way straight to McLeod Ganj or you can stop over in Delhi.

SHORT STAY IN DELHI

There are two main areas to stay the night – Pahad Ganj and Majnu Ka Tilla. We recommend the latter since it is more peaceful.

MAJNU KA TILLA -

You can get a Taxi there directly from the Airport but bargain the prices.

There are some inexpensive hotels in Majnu and all the facilities you could need including Internet and restaurants. It's a good place to make travel arrangements since the local travel agents know all about transport to McLeod. They will make the arrangements for you or they will tell you how to do it yourself.

The best budget hotel in this area is Wongdhen House, which is clean, inexpensive and has a good restaurant - wongdhenhouse@hotmail.com

TRAINS FROM DELHI

If you are coming from Delhi you will need to get a train and then a bus or taxi. There are a number of trains from Delhi to PATHANKOT or CHAKKI BANK, the two nearest stations to Dharamsala.

CHAKKI BANK is a smaller station just a few minutes before Pathankot station. The train stops quite briefly here, so be ready to get off the train. The train guys or people in your carriage are usually very helpful in telling you when to get ready.

- A very useful webpage for trains is www.erail.in

TRAIN BOOKING OFFICES IN DELHI

There are two tourist booking offices in New Delhi providing a very convenient and easy way to buy a ticket for any train in India.

1 - INTERNATIONAL TOURIST BUREAU AT THE NEW DELHI RAILWAY STATION

(7.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8-2pm Sun).

On the first floor at the station is an office for foreigners only, so no queuing up!. They all speak English. If a train seems full, make sure to ask for the "tourist quota". This way you often will be able to get a ticket even for a train leaving on the same night.

2- RAILWAY BOOKING OFFICE - ARRIVAL HALL, DELHI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.

It is only open from 8am to 8pm.

You can pay two ways (you need your passport and a valid visa for both):

- with \$US or Sterling (you get change back in Indian rupees)
- with Indian Rupees

TYPES OF SEATS AVAILABLE:

- 2nd Class Sleeper

Provides: Wooden seat to sit/sleep on, no sheets, pillows or blankets. Bring your sleeping bag and keep an eye on your bags.

- 2 Tier Air Conditioned Carriage

Provides: Bed/seat with clean sheet, pillow and blanket given out after the train departs. Generally for middle class Indians and foreigners so it's a bit safer from bag thieves and the carriage doors are locked at night so people don't wander through.

THE FINAL LEG TO MCLEOD AFTER THE TRAIN – 2 CHOICES

1. **When you reach Pathankot/Chakki Bank, you can catch a local bus from the bus station** (you'll need to get a short inexpensive autorickshaw from Chakki Bank Railway Station to the bus station). The bus normally goes to lower Dharamsala (approximately 90 Rupees and takes around three hours). Some buses take you all the way up to McLeod Ganj, but even these stop in Lower Dharamsala for at least half an hour.
2. **When you reach Pathankot/Chakki Bank, you can catch a taxi from either railway station all the way to McLeod Ganj.** It will be affordable if others on the train, share with you. The vehicle up to McLeod Ganj will cost at least 1,200 rupees. The journey by taxi takes about two and a half hours.

GETTING FROM LOWER DHARAMSALA TO MCLEOD GANJ

You can get a bus or a shared jeep for 9 rupees or a private taxi for 120 rupees. The jeeps and taxis don't go from the bus station but from an area further up the hill, near Kotwali Bazaar.

DIRECT BUSES FROM DELHI TO MCLEOD GANJ

There are all night buses from Delhi to McLeod Ganj. The travel agents in the Tibetan colony in Delhi, at Majnu Ka Tilla, will be able to arrange these for you. They are called "luxury" buses but they are what you know as intercity coaches.

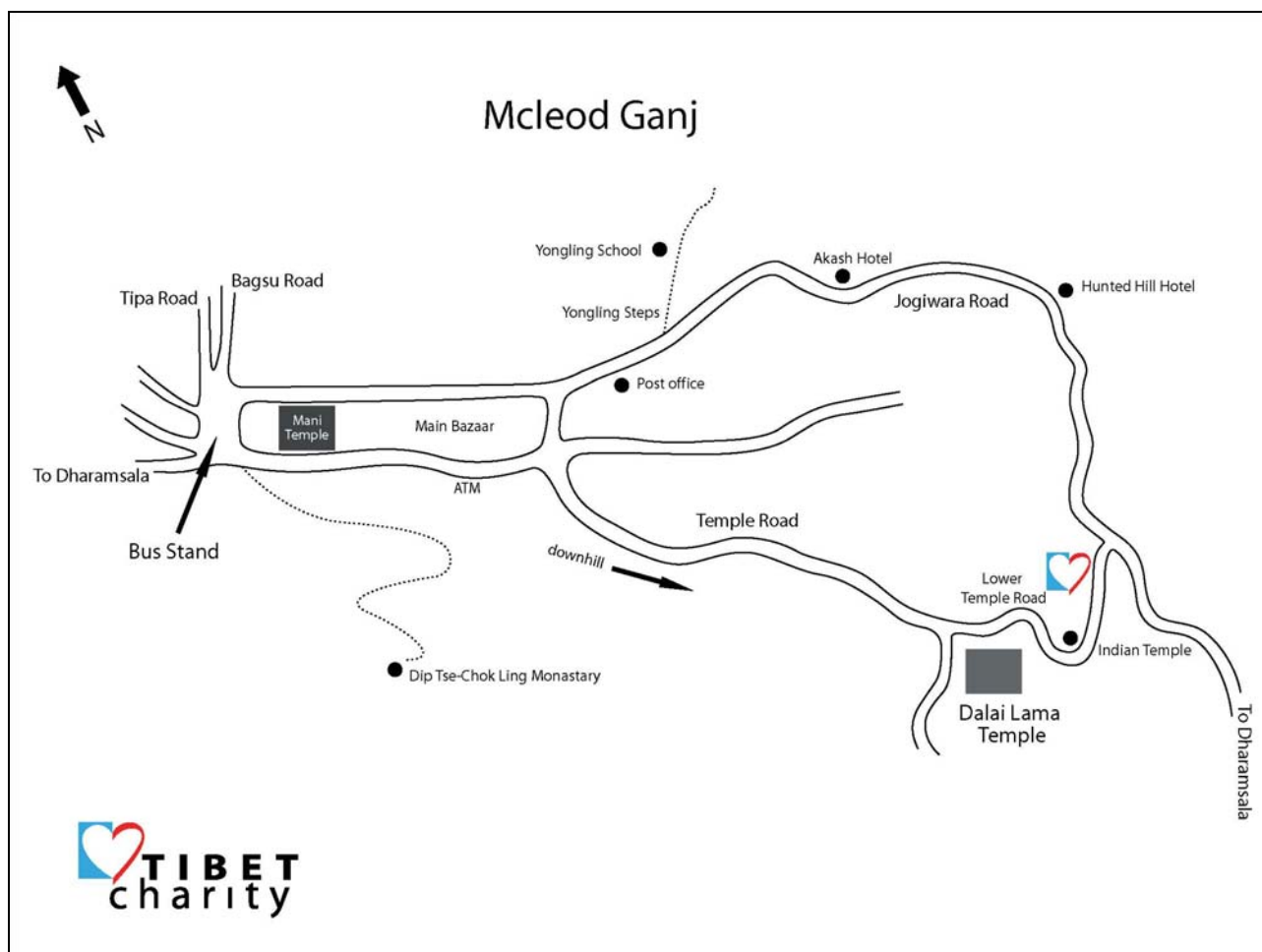
BY AIR FROM DELHI

The nearest airport to McLeod Ganj is Gaggal airport, 15 km south of Dharamsala. Planes fly from Delhi.

ON ARRIVAL IN MCLEOD GANJ

The school opens at 8am Monday to Friday. It is not open at the weekend. If you arrive in the middle of the night then you should find a hotel near the small square where the bus drops you. There are hotels within a few hundred meters, down Bagsu road. It is advisable to take a room in one of these and then come down to the school the following morning.

LOCATION OF THE SCHOOL



MONEY

There is an ATM (cash withdrawal machine) in town that is used by every tourist and traveler who passes through, so it works most of the time. In fact it is the artery that keeps this town alive.

In the event that it fails, there are 4 more such outlets in Lower Dharamsala, a Rs. 9 jeep ride away!

It is therefore probably not necessary to bring cash or travelers cheques (but you MUST of course check with your own bank that your card will allow you to take out money in India - it will depend on what kind of card you have and what are its limits). The biggest banking network here is the State Bank Of India, their website lists all their ATM machines in India. There are ATM machines all over India.

You can also get money from certain shops and finance offices using your credit/debit cards but they will take 3% commission.

It is advisable to keep some of your own currency in the event of losing your cards.

ACCOMODATION

The room rates change according to the season. Accommodation in McLeod, for a hotel room, starts at Rs. 200 on average. That usually includes a separate bathroom with a shower, fed by an electric boiler. There are several hotels near the school, which, for the same price, include a TV. Rooms are spacious and clean.

The Charity has special arrangements with several local hotels on cut rates for long term stays. If you come straight to the school, we will find you a room.

If you take any room on a longer basis, for at least a month, rooms are cheaper and can include a kitchen though you will usually have to buy your own calor gas cylinder (from Lower Dharamsala). You can buy fresh fruit and vegetable in town as well as staples such as rice and lentils if you wish to cater for yourself.

Some of the hotels provide food, but that is extra. There are a lot of good and reputable restaurants in the town, many catering to vegetarians. Volunteers and staff at the school share a (free) lunch every day at the school, on weekdays.

HEALTH ISSUES

WATER

The tap water should be avoided, this is particularly true in the monsoon season (even the locals drink bottled water at this time). Mineral water is available everywhere.

FOOD

There are many safe places to eat so there is no need to take any risks with your health. Dishes made with lots of water, such as soups, should be avoided in the monsoon season if you are being ultra cautious.

MEDICAL FACILITIES

There is a health clinic at the centre. They can help you with minor ailments or refer you to a doctor.

- There is an inexpensive Tibetan medical clinic called Mentse Khang, dispensing Tibetan remedies, which is a 10-minute walk from the centre.
- There are also clinics dealing in Western medicine, these are more expensive than the Tibetan ones but cheap by western standards.
- Indian doctors are well trained and there are 2 pharmacies, one well stocked, near the main square for whatever they prescribe.
- The local Delek Hospital in McLeod Ganj is another option for treatment from a Western doctor.

MALARIA

Cases of malaria in McLeod are almost unheard of. We do not think there is any need to take anti-malarials if you intend to remain in McLeod all the time.

However please note: Whether you take anti-malarial drugs or not is your own responsibility, the school can only advise you, you must decide for yourself. You should consult health professionals or travel experts in your own country and do your own research on the Internet, bearing in mind that some websites are less reliable than others. (There are parts of India where you **should** take these preventive drugs)

CLIMATE AND TERRAIN

Dharamsala is at an altitude of 1700m, so be prepared for all types of weather

Monsoon season is from July to September.

Dharamsala receives the second highest rainfall in India. It is very wet and humid but you can buy an umbrella here at every second shop so no need to bring one. It is not cold but you should bring a light jacket to wear over your T shirt.

October – November This is the best time of year with clear skies and low humidity. It is colder than in the monsoon season (the sun is strong but there is a cool wind). It is the best time for hiking with great views over the mountains and valleys.

December – February The temperature can drop below freezing and it snows. Bring heavy warm clothes but don't over pack since woolen gloves, socks, sweaters or shawls are all available in shops here for reasonable prices.

March – July The summer season in Dharamsala. It doesn't reach 30 centigrade though so it's very pleasant in the day though the nights become slightly cold.

Bring a good pair of walking boots if you intend to explore. The hills around are steep and rugged. The town is surrounded by fragrant pine forests that are beautiful at all times of year. The local hills give way to snow capped mountains that are easily reachable within a day. In half an hour you can be in pristine natural landscape. There is well organized trekking all year round.

TRANSPORT IN TOWN

Most people get around town on foot but you could buy a small motorbike or scooter for around 15,000 rupees. Departing tourists sell off their bikes when they leave, there are public notice boards for displaying such adverts throughout town.

You can hire Indian motorbikes and scooters, from a shop near the school, if you want to venture out on an excursion, prices are from 300 rupees a day, petrol/gas is around 50 rupees a liter.

Some of the roads are steep but most facilities are within a short range that doesn't take too much out of you. There are cheap regular buses and taxi-jeeps to Lower Dharamsala.

Getting to other towns by public transport usually requires going down to Lower Dharamsala and heading out from there, though there are some direct buses.

EATING

Volunteers can have a nutritious meal with the staff free of charge at the school on weekdays.

For R150 a day you can eat your fill at any of the numerous restaurants in town, many offering vegetarian cuisine. There are many restaurants catering to western tastes (decent pizza, pastas, pancakes, tortillas and chow mein).

For R200 a day you will eat like a king and never risk the Delhi Belly. You can get by on R120 if you are really being frugal. Visitors are advised to drink mineral water and that costs R15 a litre, or is even cheaper if you get it from the hotels that have purifiers.

Some of the street food is well worth trying, but there is always a chance of stomach upset – there are steamed momos, roasted sweet corn, and even fried chicken in the main square. There are fruits and vegetables on sale all year round, they are safe to eat if you remove the skins, or boil them properly.

Alcohol is available but is expensive by Indian standards (probably similar to what you pay at home). The Hotel Tibet, McLlo restaurant and Carpe Diem are some of the places to have a beer with your dinner though there are also shops selling alcohol over the counter.

WWW.TIBETCHARITY.IN

A photo gallery on the volunteer's page will give you a good impression of life in the town

Other Resources

We recommend the "India Mike" bulletin board website for information on all aspects of traveling in India.
